Ira and Anna Mandler Wells
Photo courtesy of Douglas County Museum

Courting and the Call West

From "A Simple Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Anna Elizabeth Mandler Wells"

Transcribed by Mary T. Wells

Entry 2 of 4

One beautiful spring morning, in the early month of May when all nature seemed at its best, with flowers blooming, birds singing, green grass waving and the sun shining over all—Anna Elizabeth Mandler went to the village church as was her custom. She met there for the first time a young man with soldierly bearing, fine erect carriage, dark hair, blue eyes and friendly smile. She became interested with his pleasing manner. He was introduced by friends as Ira Wells, but recently out of the Black Hawk war, having served as a 2nd lieutenant, during the skirmish, capture and vanquishment of Capt. Black Hawk and his warriors in 1837. On the 10th of December 1844, Anna Elizabeth Mandler became the wife of the same Ira Wells at her family home in Hampton Bluff, near which they began the work of making their new home in a little house built of logs, overlooking the beautiful little valley of Rock River, where Captain Black Hawk and his brave warriors fought their last battle only a few miles from Rock Island on one hand and Hampton on the other. Three years they lived there—one child was born to them there. Then came the Government call for settlers for the Oregon Country—Oregon must be saved for America—Oregon must have settlers. Then came promise of land on which to build homes for those who would come and bring families. That pioneer spirit kept whispering to them Go—go west and grow up with the country. The country was new where they were. The Indians had been driven out—land was rich and they owned a reasonable share and their people all lived near them. It was hard, so hard, to think of leaving all and going out into they knew not what, but the urge was strong—there were Indians to subdue, more forests to conquer and a wild country to tame down. They must do their part towards building an empire for America, so the decision was made, the die cast, and they began preparations for the journey. One day in the early part of April, 1847 when all nature was beginning to put forth her new garments of green, amid tears and bowed heads a little company gathered together with covered wagons and ox

teams, a few horses and cows and the necessary articles of food and raiment, and started out on their perilous journey across mountains and valleys and barren wastes. Not knowing where they were going or what might befall them before they reached their journey's end, or what they would find should they be fortunate enough to ever reach the goal for which they had started, six long months of toil and struggle beset with a constant fear of an Indian outbreak or perhaps an attack by wild animals that roamed the forests in plentiful numbers. But they were a brave people, none faltered or failed, none murmured or complained, nor did they turn back. All had set out with determined hearts to reach the west and there to do their best. With wagons and oxen they would form a circle with the women and children in the center, while men with rifles and muskets stood guard on the outside thus forming a circle within a circle for protection at night from the marauding Indians. Even so they were sometimes surprised to find they had stealthily crept in and stampeded their cattle causing much delay. But they had no serious trouble with them. They treated them kindly, gave them food, and they in turn let them move on in peace. At the crossing of the Rogue river on this journey occurred the first great sorrow of their married life by the death of their first born child, perhaps 18 months old. The mother left her sleeping in the wagon while she went to the assistance of her fellow travelers, whose goods, bedding and food had gotten wet in crossing the river. The wagon was started in her absence, the child was thrown from the wagon, fell under the wheels and was crushed to death. It was a great shock and lasting sorrow to the young mother, whose heart yearned for and sorrowed over this first little one, till life's latest day. She could not bear to leave the little body in the wilderness alone, so kind friends helped and they carried her to the first signs of a white man's habitation that was Eugene Skinners. They buried her on Skinners Butte, having reached that point Oct. 14th, 1847, and there the company disbanded, each going their several ways looking for locations.

Please Return

A SIMPLE SKETCH

of

THE LIFE OF Mrs. ANNA ELIZABETH MANDLER WELLS

Source Document

Ira and Anna Mandler Wells
Photo courtesy of Douglas County Museum

Courting and the Call West

From “A Simple Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Anna Elizabeth Mandler Wells,”
Transcribed by Mary T. Wells – Part 2 of 4

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt
February 17 2026

My first connection to family history came through a heavy old Victorian photo album passed down from my grandmother—originally inherited from her mother, and in turn from hers. It was filled with 19th-century portraits, most of them unlabeled and unfamiliar. My grandmother recognized a few: her young mother and a handful of aunts. The rest were a mystery. She did know that “there are Applegates in there”—another part of the story.

The image featured here of Ira and Anna Wells, however, isn’t from that album. It’s part of the Douglas County Museum collection (Umpqua Valley Museums). I believe it ended up there after the Wells family home in Elkton was emptied. Two of the Wells sisters, including Mary T. Wells, lived there until the end of their lives. When the estate was settled, many family items were donated to the museum—this photograph likely among them.

The photo dates to around 1865, near the end of the Civil War. According to documentation, Ira Wells was 51 and Anna Elizabeth Mandler Wells was 43. In the image, Ira stands beside his wife, while Anna—formerly the young immigrant girl from Prussia—sits at the center of her growing family. Her dress is extraordinary—almost certainly handmade.

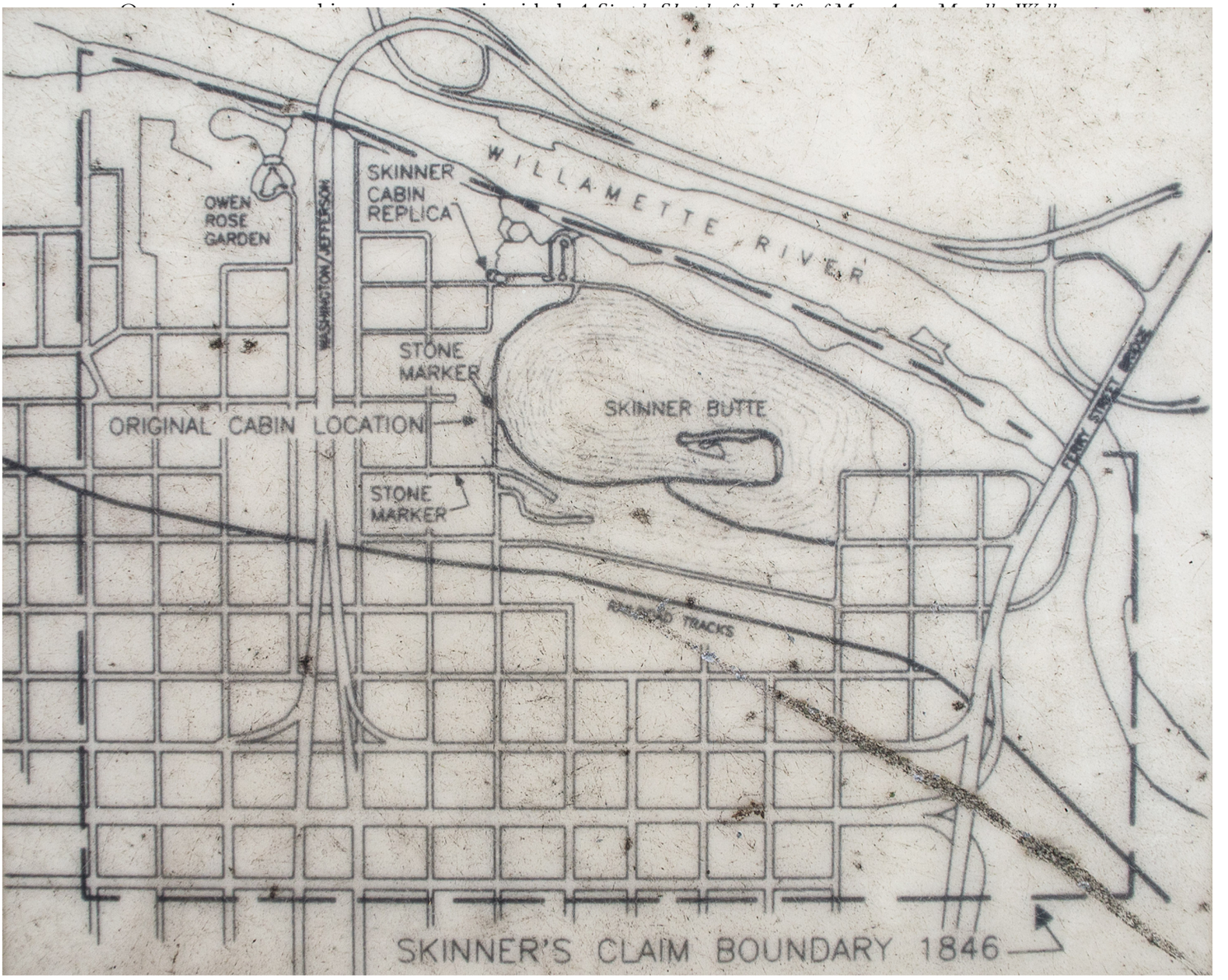
There’s a part of Wells family lore that has always given me pause. The family originally migrated west up the Missouri River and settled on land that, by treaty, belonged to the Black Hawk tribe. That encroachment helped ignite the Black Hawk War. The Wells brothers—along with other settlers—fought in that conflict. Historical records describe them as particularly “fierce” fighters, a chilling euphemism that likely means they killed a lot of people. These ancestors were among those who took land by force. I don’t take pride in that, but I believe it’s important to acknowledge. We all inherit complicated legacies. (For context, the Black Hawk War was also Abraham Lincoln’s first military commission—though I’d have to look up his exact rank.)

Growing up, I didn’t even know these family records existed. My grandmother kept her boxes of photos buried deep in a back closet, safely out of reach. My grandfather had a similar collection stored in the attic above the garage. Together, those boxes held a treasure trove of family history—but they stayed tucked away.

One exception was this very manuscript titled *A Simple Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Anna Mandler Wells*. Occasionally, she brought it out, and when she did, it felt like magic. It was our origin story—how our people came West. At the time, I didn't realize it was just one of many. At least seven different wagon trains brought branches of our family to Oregon – an incredulous number. This one—Anna and Ira's journey—was in 1847.

Years later, when my daughters were young and reading *Little House on the Prairie*, I decided to share the family story with them. I thought it would resonate. The sad story about the toddler being crushed under the wagon wasn't just upsetting—it was devastating. My daughters were traumatized. I look back now and wonder how I could have told it differently.

Ira and Anna eventually arrived in what would become Eugene, Oregon—at the time, little more than a lone cabin belonging to Eugene Skinner. Their child was buried on the southern slope of Skinner's Butte, an unknown grave. Now a park at the heart of the city.



Skinner's Claim Boundary (1846)

Centered on present-day Skinner Butte—early Eugene townsite and homestead of Eugene Skinner.
Map courtesy of Eugene Parks and Recreation. Image via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA)